

Kids Don't Float, a successful program

by Rick Johnston



Smart parents put PFD's on kids of all types. Kahlia insures that her puppy will float too. USFWS/Photo credit: Rick Johnston

The recent drowning on the Kenai River at Naptowne rapids and other unfortunate drowning-related fatalities brought back memories and somber reflections of similar incidents on the numerous lakes and rivers throughout the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. When I first joined the Refuge staff in 1979, it had been only a short time since several drownings and near drownings in Skilak and Tustumena Lakes. The cold glacier-influenced lakes and rivers of the Refuge have summer temperatures in the mid to high 40°F. Add an overloaded boat and/or unpredictable weather and tragedy can be near. Even a good swimmer has poor odds of survival without a life jacket (PFD). Children are particularly vulnerable, and no PFD or a mis-sized PFD on a child can be tragic.

I have always been puzzled by people venturing onto the swift Kenai River or a choppy lake with children in tow and with the life jackets stowed or absent. Most boating fatalities on the Kenai NWR involve not wearing a PFD. Simply put, personal flotation gives a floating victim more time to be rescued or for self-rescue before succumbing to Alaska cold water, period! Canoes and no PFD have on many occasions been a formula for disaster. Small flat-bottom lake boats with minimal free board have also been prone to capsizing. Such boats do poorly in open choppy water or on swift moving rivers. While boating tragedies can

often be traced to less than suitable watercraft or inexperienced operators, boating accidents can happen to very experienced persons who are good swimmers and who are operating otherwise seaworthy watercraft in random and unpredictable situations.

I recall one unlikely incident where a boat operator dropped off his passengers at lower Skilak boat ramp. While a member of his party retrieved their vehicle, the boat operator made a wide circle to meet the trailer. The operator apparently made a misstep and ended up in the water as the boat careened off. Although help was near, the middle-aged man was not wearing his life jacket and slipped under the surface. What would have been a cold and embarrassing safety lesson recalled around the campfire with a PFD, turned out to be a family tragedy that altered many lives.

Then there was the incident where Larry Dutton, a career Division of Forestry employee and boating expert inexplicably fell out of his boat and drowned near Kenai Keys. Or the foreign tourist who stood up in her canoe at the Skilak outlet and fell overboard, not to be recovered for several weeks.

One of my first assignments after joining the Refuge staff was to reword an existing coldwater warning sign at the Skilak Lake ramps. I researched the accident history starting with assistant Refuge Manager Jim Peterson who drowned in 1955 in Skilak Lake and a more recent tragedy involving a family making the Kenai River to Upper Skilak crossing. In all, there had been over twenty five fatalities and most were equally cold water and failure to wear a PFD related. I proposed a shock factor version of the sign in an attempt to deter future poor judgment. I intentionally and insensitively described the Skilak Lake body count with an X through the latest tally and a new number posted. My supervisor reworded the draft sign with more tasteful wording, but with the same lifesaving goal. Fortunately, and in part, due to the warning sign and perhaps other factors, fatalities and capsizing incidents have decreased in recent years. I suspect the decreasing fatalities have also been due to other factors such as increased boating enforcement and to the innovative KIDS DON'T FLOAT program.

Alaska and U.S. Coast Guard boating regulations

provide the framework to reduce boating related incidents and fatalities. Along with specific vessel requirements, regulations require that functional and weight appropriate PFD's be available for each vessel passenger and that children under age 13 wear their PFD. Refuge Rangers are ordinarily a friendly sort, however, having a PFD on board is non-negotiable and failure to do so almost always will result in a Notice of Violation and an escort off the water. Officers are particularly diligent about the requirement for children to wear an appropriately-sized PFD. While, boating education and boating regulation enforcement are important aspects of enhanced safety, programs such as the KIDS DON'T FLOAT are in my estimation one of the real reasons for fewer fatalities on the Kenai Peninsula waters.

"KIDS DON'T FLOAT" is a highly successful program to provide child-sized loaner life jackets at various boat ramps, marinas, and river launches etc. The on-site life jacket loan program was originally started by Homer Fire Department volunteers in 1996 with a grant from The Alaska Department of Social Services in collaboration with Homer Safe Kids, the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary and the Homer School District to establish 15 bay side PFD loaner boards at Kachemak Bay communities. The program was initiated to reduce Alaska's historically high drowning rates among children.

The program was expanded to Kenai-Soldotna-Cooper Landing area boat launches with the efforts of Kenai Peninsula Safe Kids and Central Emergency Services and the Alaska Division of Parks, with expanded support from the state and U.S. Coast Guard. The expanded program included several Kenai National Wildlife Refuge launches. "KIDS DON'T FLOAT" has grown to 425 loaner boards placed throughout Alaska with overall coordination by the State of Alaska boating safety located in the Alaska, Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks. The way the program works, is to have available various sized loaned PFD's for families that either forgot to bring or didn't have a functional and size-appropriate kids sized life jacket. Cooperators like the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge keep loaner boards stocked with kid PFD's and return jackets dropped off at downstream loaner boards to

upstream loaner boards to once again be used.

While the occasional life jacket is not returned, for the most part the public has fully embraced the program with significantly increased frequency of kids wearing life jackets on Refuge waters.

Almost every time I have been on the water either for Refuge patrol or a personal trip in the last several years I have seen families taking part in the loaner program.

While it is sobering to think how many persons have arrived at Refuge launches without appropriate kids life jackets, it is equally gratifying to see that parents are at least taking advantage of this smart and successful program.

According to the Office of Boating Safety web page, <http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/boating/kdfhome.htm>, since the programs inception at least twelve Alaska kids have survived a near drowning incident because of a KIDS DON'T FLOAT life jacket. I recall one incident on the Kenai River upstream from Russian River within Chugach National Forest where the kids wore the available KIDS DON'T FLOAT loaned PFD's obtained at the State Parks launch in Cooper Landing and an adult was not wearing a PFD. Tragically, but not surprisingly, the canoe capsized in a rapid section two miles downstream; the child survived and the adult did not.

The signs and loaner boards have also increased the overall awareness of the need to wear adult life jackets. I have seen an increasing number of boaters make good safety decision.

Hats off to the innovative persons who started the KIDS DON'T FLOAT PROGRAM and to those who continue to maintain loaner boards throughout the Kenai Peninsula and Alaska. And a special thanks to parents and boat operators who insist that PFD's be worn by all passengers, particularly each child on board.

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